Murder, My Dear Detective

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Murder, My Dear Detective

by Lepord257

Summary

When Juno agrees to help a man by the name of “Mag Ransom” track down his son, his life gets very complicated very quickly. The missing persons case is put on the backburner as he deals with a botched blackmarket deal that ends with Cresus dead in a ditch, the mysterious “Alessandra Strong” on his contacts list, and a handsome socialite named “Dauphin Zolatovna” who would very much like his jade necklace back before his wife Nova worries herself to death. No one in Hyperion City is who they appear to be, and the more Juno looks into things the more dangerous they become.

(created for the 2020 minibang)

Notes

This is sort of a hybrid between the original Farewell, My Lovely pulp story, the Murder, My Sweet adaptation of it, and our one and only Juno Steel. You don't need to have read it or seen the movie to understand what's up, but if you're interested you should do that first since the way I cast characters makes one of the major plot points incredibly obvious. Also it's a really good movie and if you like Juno Steel you're gonna love Philip Marlowe since he's the reason half the PI tropes exist.

Also, be forewarned I'm going very noir here, so this story doesn't have a happy ending. It's bittersweet in a broody detective way. It's a fun pulpy ride, but fluff it ain't.

edit: now with art, courtesy of lucarosearts on tumblr!

See the end of the work for more notes

Florian's

Stopping by Florian's was an impulse decision. I'd been failing to track down a florist's wayward husband for almost a week now, and there's only so many red herrings you can chase down before you start to

wonder if you're wading through the wrong pond. I hadn't been to that particular gin joint since it changed owners a decade back, but Mr. Aleidis was as likely to be at the bottom of a glass of rotgut as he was a glass of top-shelf whiskey.

The bar was quieter than I remembered, and not just because the last time I was here Cass Kanegawa broke a chair over a bouncer's head. Only a handful of people were around this early in the day, and most of the ones that were stuck to the edges of the room staring silently into dirty shot and pint glasses. The one who wasn't was an older man, heavyset and bearded, annoying the bartender.

I caught some of the conversation:

"Look buddy, I don't know the guy. I don't know anyone who would know the guy. I've been here for a month and a half; I don't know the names of every regular over the last decade."

"Perhaps you could point me to-"

The bartender turned their back on the man to take my order. Only, the bar wasn't big enough for me to sit anywhere but next to him and I had to resist the urge to giggle while requesting my whiskey sour from the back of their head.

The bearded man heaved a heavy sigh. I took pity on him. "How long ago was the guy you're looking for hanging out here?"

"Ten years, give or take."

"Ten years ago this was a different bar."

He grinned, and not at anything funny. "I'm beginning to get that impression."

"No, it was *literally* a different bar. This used to be high society - all rich kids and their buddies."

The bartender, content to leave the babysitting to someone else for a while, retrieved a once-white rag and began wiping down the other end of the bar. Between the rag and the counter, the bartender could very well have been trying to prove the concept of absolute equilibrium.

"Really?"

I shrugged. “Times change. Florian doesn’t even own the place anymore. Sign’s built into the building, so the new management never bothered taking it down.”

He looked me up and down, more carefully this time, cataloguing every detail. Item 1: trench coat, sturdy and tinted red from years exposure to Martian sands. Item 2: boots, heavy and toeing the line between “broken in” and “broken down”. Item 3: Nose, scarred. Item 4: Newly acquired regret at having initiated conversation.

“Sounds like I should started with you.”

“Might have been smart. Name’s Juno Steel, private eye.”

There’s something cold and calculating behind his cold, grey eyes at that. “Mag Ransom. Client, hopefully.”

“What’s the case?”

“It’s my son.”

My fingers tightened around my glass. There’s a lot of reasons a parent could be tracking down a missing child. Some of them were even good. Most of the time though, there was a reason the two had fallen out of touch. “What about him?”

“We fell out of touch, years ago. It was my fault really. I was too involved in work to pay attention and I didn’t like his friends. It all seems so petty now. But things have changed over the years; *I’ve* changed. I’d like the chance to reconnect. To let him know that’s on the table.”

He sounded earnest enough. There was a set to his shoulders that spoke to regrets and lost time. Maybe he was a liar, but there was no way of knowing without talking to the kid. And if he wasn’t, well.

“You got anything to go on?”

His smile reached his eyes finally, but the edge didn’t leave them. “His name’s Velma Valento. Tall like a lamppost, grey eyes like mine. Doesn’t look a thing like me otherwise. His real father died when he was a boy; I just raised him. He was a regular here nine, ten years ago, but anything else I know is decades out of date.”

I fished a pen from my pocket and scribbled down comms coordinates on an abandoned napkin. “I’ll see if I can pass on a message. Call my

secretary; she takes care of the details."

He read them over a few times before pocketing the napkin. "Good luck, Steel. I'll be in touch."

Polaroids

Chapter Summary

> Juno's newest client is looking for his estranged son, Velma Valento, who frequented Florian's when Juno went there ten years ago. Juno's first stop in the search is Jessie Florian, the bar's old owner.

Chapter Notes

> Art in this chapter is provided (in order of appearance) by zellymaybloom and nottodaylogic on tumblr

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I didn't remember the last time I'd seen Jessie Florian. I didn't remember anything else about that night either. She remembered me though, if the way she slammed the door in my face was any indication.

"Oh come on, I'm bearing gifts!"

The reply was muffled. Oak's a good insulator, especially when it's real. "Leave it on the doorstep."

"In this neighborhood? I risked life and limb to bring it here; I can't risk it falling into the hands of someone who wouldn't appreciate it." I paused, but there wasn't a reply. "It's whiskey. Imported, all the way from Earth. Aged in real oak barrels."

I paused again, and this time the lock clicked. The woman who opened the door hadn't changed much in the decade or so since I'd seen her. Still short and sharp with hair the exact shade where you're not sure whether to put down "brown" or "blonde" on your driver's license. The sundress was new, or at least I'd never seen her wear one. Florian's, when she ran it, wasn't the sort of place you wear picnic clothes.

"What do you want?"

I waggled the whiskey. The bottle cost me a pretty penny, but nothing less would have persuaded Florian to give me the time of day. "A gal can't want to catch up with old friends?"

She scowled. “No.” She waved me in anyway. “Sit down; I’ll dig up some glasses.”

She’d accumulated a lot of clutter over the years. An antique chaise lounge piled high with actual, paper books was shoved awkwardly into a corner to make room for an even older fainting couch, A replica jukebox played a static-filled rendition of *What’s New Pussycat.* Watercolors and acrylics fought for wall space. I couldn’t tell you if the floor was wood or carpet under all the rugs.

I guessed it would take a minute for Florian to find the glasses. In the meantime, I plucked a shoebox off the steamer trunk currently doing double duty as a coffee table. The shoebox was full of photos. They’d been edited and printed to look like ancient polaroids, but they were only nine years old.

I knew that because I remembered the night they were taken. Well, I remembered *parts* of the night they were taken. It was someone’s birthday; I didn’t remember who’s. They’d brought a photographer with them to document the occasion and everyone posed with props and costumes. I didn’t know what happened to the one of me. I had a sneaking suspicion Rita’d gotten her hands on it, but until she used it to blackmail me into movie night or manicures it wasn’t my problem.

One photo in particular caught my eye. It was near the bottom of the box, and the subject was sitting as prim as you can on a barstool. The man in the photo was tall and thin, holding a giant fan of feathers in front of his face so only his eyes were visible. Grey eyes. I flipped the photo over. Written in pen on the back were the words “Velma Valento, xoxo”.

Zelly

Velma
Valonta
XOXO

There was a crash from the kitchen. I shoved the photo in my pocket and dropped the shoebox back on the trunk. Florian emerged from the kitchen with a pair of matching crystalline wine glasses, and I poured us drinks.

“So,” she said, pulling an ottoman out from under half a picnic table, “what’s this really about?”

“I’m looking to remensize.”

“Seems like there should be better people to do that with than the manager of a bar you went to once in a blue moon ten years ago and then trashed.”

“I’m glad you think so highly of my social life. How well do you remember the people who went more regularly?”

Florian took a sip. She made it look far more elegant than it deserved to. “Leave the bottle and maybe I’ll tell you.”

I grimaced like that wasn’t the plan all along.

“This is a limited time offer, Steel; take it or leave it.”

“Twist my arm then. The name’s Valento. Velma. Tall guy, grey eyes. Would have been coming around the same time I was.”

Florian stilled. She considered her wine glass, still mostly untouched. Then she took the bottle and poured herself another few fingers worth. “Doesn’t ring a bell.”

I leaned forward. “Maybe if I showed you a picture?”

She shrugged and took another long sip. “If you can find one, maybe, but I don’t keep track of every would-be socialite to come through my bar.”

“Funny you say that.” I set down my glass on box labeled “X-mas ornaments”, whatever those are, and pulled the faux polaroid from my pocket. “Because it looks like you keep track of some of them.”

Florian peered at Velma’s picture over the brim of her glass, eyes narrowed. “A keepsake, from a long time ago. It doesn’t mean anything.”

She reached for the picture, but I snatched it back. “Then you won’t mind if I hang on to it.”

“I think it’s time for you to go, Steel.”

“Why don’t you want me to find him?”

“I said, get out!” I flinched in time for crystal to go flying past my ear, shattering on the floral wallpaper and dousing us both with un-drunk whiskey. Florian was on her feet now, comms in hand, but she couldn’t come any closer without risking shards slicing up her bare feet.

I grabbed the whiskey bottle. “Thanks for your time, Florian. You’ve been a real help.”

“God-*damnit* Steel, you son of a-”

I slammed the door on my way out.

Florian knew more than she was telling, that’s for sure, but I was more interested in what she was planning on doing with her comms. It couldn’t have been calling the cops. She wasn’t stupid enough to invite them in, and her money was too wrapped up in antiques to be able to bribe them. So who was she going to call? I pressed my ear to the door, but if she was talking to anyone, I couldn’t hear it.

Chapter End Notes

image id 1: Peter Nureyev is sitting on a bar stool. His feet are on the rung so his blue flats are visible. He's wearing thigh high pantyhose and a short blue dress with lace and pearls on the hem and shoulder straps. Most of his face and body is hidden by a fan of peacock feathers. Above the fan, he's wearing glasses, blue eye shadow, and blue dangly earrings. His eyes are grey.

image id 2: A grey scale drawing of a polaroid photo. In it, Peter is wearing a short dress that ends at the knees. He's sitting on a bar stool and leaning against the bar. He's holding a feather fan that obscures his upper body and most of his face. You can only see one of his eyes. The photo is signed "Velma Valento xoxo" in a fancy script font.

image id3: The same drawing of a polaroid as above, but colored. The image has a sepia tone. The bar is brown, his dress a dusty pink, and the fan a brighter and lighter pink. His visible eye is grey.

An Unrelated Call

Chapter Summary

> Having returned from Florian's apartment with an old photo of Velma she lied about having, Juno heads back to him office. He gets a call from an old....acquaintance.

Rita was arguing with someone over comms when I got back to the office. Probably Ransom, or a past client fallen behind on payments. Rita waved me over as soon as I was through the door. I shook my head. It was hardly ever a good idea for me to talk to clients instead of Rita. Apparently I can be “rude” and “unprofessional”. Rita got up from her desk and chased me back to mine.

“Oh look, the boss just got back in. I’m sure he’ll want to sort this out himself.”

“No, Rita, don’t you dare, I don’t want - Steel speaking.”

“Steel.” It wasn’t Ransom. It wasn’t an old client either.

“Croesus.” My chair creaked as I sat down. “Can’t say I expected to hear from you today. Or ever.”

“I can’t say I expected to be calling.” He sounded disgruntled. “But I have a job that needs doing, and you’re the best person for it.”

“I’ll pass.”

“You don’t even know what the job is.”

“I don’t need to. I’m not interested, and I have a case already, so if you could just hang up and never call back-”

“Ten-thousand creds.”

“*Not interested.* ”

“Ten-thousand creds and I’ll lift your blacklist.”

That gave me pause. After I’d saved Cecil - well, most of Cecil - Croesus hadn’t just banned me from the Kanagawa mansion. He’d also spread word that I couldn’t be trusted in every circle he had influence in, and he had influence in a lot of circles. If Croesus was serious

about lifting the blacklist…

“What’s the job?”

“I need a bodyguard.”

“Don’t you have people for that?”

“*Min* has people for that. I need someone who values,” he paused, searching for the right word, “discretion.”

My eyebrows climbed so high they nearly hit my hat. “*Really?* ”

Croesus plowed on. “I’m meeting some people in a warehouse in Old Town later tonight. Purely business. I need you to ensure everything goes smoothly.”

“I gotta say, Croesus, I didn’t think you *could* be blackmailed.”

“It isn’t blackmail!”

I hummed noncommittally.

“It isn’t blackmail,” he said again, calmer his time. “A friend of mine was held up on the way back from a party the other night. Some jewels were taken and I’m buying them back.”

“Must be some jewels.”

There was a heavy silence on the other end of the comms.

“They are.”

“Spill.”

“You know enough.”

“I still have Cass’ number.”

Another heavy silence. “Have you ever heard of Fei Tsui jade?”

“It’s green, isn’t it?”

“It’s unique to Earth, and all known deposits were excavated in their entirety in the 17th century. This particular necklace is even older. The people who stole it are only asking for a few million creds, paltry compared to its actual value, but still more than my friend has on

hand. Call it a favor."

"A favor Min can't know about. How good of a friend is this guy, exactly?"

"A car will be by your office shortly. And Steel? Don't mess this one up."

The Warehouse

Chapter Summary

> Juno's put the missing person's case on hold to do a job for Croesus. He's meant to play bodyguard while Croesus buys back a priceless jade necklace for a "friend". There are complications.

Croesus was the only person in the car when it arrived forty minutes later. We kept to side streets for the most part, dark streets with half the street lights out of order and the other half carefully avoided by streetside entrepreneurs. I kept one hand in my pocket, reassuring myself with the cool weight of my blaster every time the Croesus fell into shadow.

We reached the gate separating Old Town from Hyperion propper just past midnight. Croesus took it as his cue to acknowledge my presence for the first time since I got in the car.

“Get in the back and keep out of sight.”

“There a reason you’re trying to aggravate my back pain, Croesus, or is this just your idea of a tip?”

“I was told to come alone. I’d have you drive, but only a blind man could get the two of us confused.”

“…Fine.”

Land is at a premium on Mars thanks to all the radiation, so places are only really abandoned on technicalities. A corporation might decide the upkeep costs are too high to be profitable and pack up shop, but that’s just an open invitation for less legitimate organizations to move on in. The warehouse Croesus brought us to was a prime example. The loading door was hanging on its hinges by sheer force of will and the logo of whatever company owned it was gratified to the point of illegibility. A single light burned in a broken window on the second floor. As I watched, it flickered and went out.

We couldn’t have been the only people on the block planning black market deals that night, but that didn’t stop me from imagining we were the only people left on the planet. The silence when Croesus cut the engine was absolute.

“You have your blaster?” He was staring through the passenger window at the warehouse, dim in the ever-present blue glow of the dome.

I nodded. Either he caught the movement in his peripheral or he took my silence as an affirmative, because he continued.

“I’ll go in first. Wait a minute and then follow. Stick to the shadows.”

I nodded again. Croesus spent a few long seconds tapping out a beat on the steering wheel before climbing out of the car and marching head-high into the warehouse. I counted thirty-nine seconds before the screaming started. By forty-two I was out of the car. At forty-seven the screaming stopped. By fifty-four I was inside. Fifty-five and I was on the ground.

I scrambled to my feet, slipping again on something slick and hot. I didn’t look at the thing I’d tripped over. I didn’t need to. My hands were sticky from breaking my fall.

There was movement on my right. I brought my blaster up to bear, but not fast enough. There was a sizzle of blasterfire. I hit the deck, gagging at the rich copper stench. I shouldn’t have bothered. The shot went wide; I could have stood perfectly still and it wouldn’t have grazed me. I pushed myself up to my knees.

“Stay down!” My assailant ran out of the darkness. She was big and broad shouldered, with long, thick dreadlocks tied back in a ponytail. She fired off another shot. I watched its arc this time, following it across the warehouse clipping a rack of crates just as another shadowy figure ducks behind it.

She took off, and I took off after her. She rounded the corner like a professional, back to the shelf, turn and fire. I wasn’t nearly as graceful. Turns out it’s hard to come to an abrupt stop when your shoes are coated with blood. By the time I peeled myself off the wall, the mystery woman was halfway down the hall leaning out a side door.

“They’re gone.” She stared out into the dark night. Nothing moved. “You,” she said, turning to me. “Who are you and what are you doing here?”

“You first.”

“I saved your life. You first.”

Couldn't argue with that. "Juno Steel," I said. "Private Eye. I was supposed to be watching the poor sap on the floor back there make a purchase."

"What kind of purchase?"

"Does it matter?"

"Someone died."

When you put it that way. "A necklace. Fei Tsui jade. Now you."

"Alessandra Strong. Concerned citizen."

"Try the other one."

"I go for drives sometimes when I can't sleep," she insisted. "I noticed the light in the window and thought there might be trouble."

I snorted. "You were going for a relaxing drive through an *abandoned warehouse district* , thought there might be something dangerous happening, and *got out of the car?* And you expect me to believe that?"

"Like I said. Concerned citizen."

We held eye contact for a long moment. I looked away first. I started back towards the loaded door.

"Where are you going?"

"To look at the corpse."

Strong swore under her breath and followed me.

I turned on the flashlight on my comms and immediately wished I hadn't. Croesus was a mess, and my tripping over him hadn't helped any. I jerked away instinctively, trying to choke down the rising bile. Strong pulled a set of latex gloves from her pocket and crouched at the edge of the pool of blood.

"Hold that steady."

I kept my eyes open just long enough to make sure I had the body in the beams. There was a rustle of fabric.

“Three stab wounds in the back, a slit throat, and a slash across the stomach. Amature job. Any of those wounds could have killed him in three minutes or less, but they kept going until you burst in.”

“Or they wanted it to look like an amateur job.”

Strong hummed noncommittally.

“What’s he have on him?”

More fabric rustling. “A blaster he never got a chance to fire, house and car keys, a wallet with a driver's license that lists him as Croesus Kanagawa. Credit card.”

“Any cash?”

“No.”

“Huh.”

“You can turn the light off now.”

I did, gladly.

“Why’d you become a detective if you can’t handle blood?”

“Why does a concerned citizen have latex gloves and a blaster on hand?”

She glared at me. I glared at her. I liked to think I was more intimidating given that I was covered in blood, but didn’t hold out a lot of hope.

“I’m gonna call the cops,” she said at last. “Do you need a ride home?”

I grimaced. “Not if you’re calling the cops. Do me a favor and don’t tell them I was here.”

She looked confused. “Why not?”

I gestured to what used to be my favorite turtleneck. She looked less confused.

“Fine. Take off your shoes, you’re tracking blood everywhere.”

“Much obliged.”

Alessandra Strong

Chapter Summary

> The warehouse was a trap. Croesus was stabbed to death and the ransom money was stolen before Juno could stop it. Juno escaped the same face through the intervention of Alessandra Strong, who claimed she was out for a drive. Now it's the next morning, and she's back with more information.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I almost didn't go into the office the next morning. A call from Rita around ten changed my mind. I fumbled for my comms on the nightstand, aiming to turn it off. I missed.

"Uh, Boss? Were you expectin' anybody? Because there's this lady here who's real anxious to see you."

I groaned into my pillow. "She give a name?"

"Uh," There was the sound of papers rustling. "Strong. Alessandra Strong. I told her you might not be in for a while, but she just said she'd wait."

"I'll be there in twenty."

Strong was scrolling through her comms in the reception area when I arrived, rolling an unlit cigarette back and forth between her fingers. She looked up when I came in, and when she uncrossed her legs to follow me into my office, I could see flecks of blood on her combat boots. She looked well rested.

"You didn't tell the cops I was at the warehouse last night," I said, as soon as she'd shut the door.

"I almost didn't get to tell them anything. They weren't going to send anyone until I told them who died."

"That's Old Town for you. And most of the HCPD."

"You're cynical this morning."

“Why are you here, Alessandra?”

She shoved her hands in the pockets of her jacket. It was a nice jacket too. Leather, the real deal by the looks of it, lined with something heavy and soft. “I thought you might like to know who the jade necklace really belonged to.”

I studied her for a moment. Concerned citizen. Right. “And you know because…?”

“I thought the best jeweler in town would probably know, so I asked the manager at All That Glitters. I told him I was a writer and wanted to do an article on rare jade -- you know the line.”

“Mhm.”

“It belongs to a rich man in uptown. Mr. Dauphin Zolatovna. His wife is a pharmaceutical tycoon or something, enormously rich, worth about twenty trillions. Mrs. Zolatovna is flighty, anxious, and throws lavish parties whenever she gets bored of sealing herself in her mansion, while Mr. Zolatovna goes places and has a good time.

“This Glitters manager really gets around.”

“I didn’t get all of that from him,” she said with an eye roll, “Just about the necklace. The rest was courtesy of Giddy Gertie Arbogast.”

“The society editor for the *Chronicle*.” The bottle of whiskey was still in my desk drawer. Half past ten wasn’t the earliest I’d started drinking.

“I’ve known him for years. He got out his morgue file on the Zolatovnas. Look.”

She pulled her comms from her pocket and slid it across the desk. Pulled up was a photo of a man taken from behind. He was tall and thin, dark hair. I couldn’t see the eyes.

“Think he’ll talk to me?”

“I know he will.”

I looked up at her. She was smug. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I called him. It took a while to get him on the line, and when I did I gave him the same song and dance I gave the manager at Glitters. It didn’t take. He sounded tired, like he had a hangover. Yawned through the whole thing. But then I said I was working for Juno Steel and he sobered right up.”

That didn’t necessarily mean anything. I’d rubbed shoulders with enough of the upper crust of Hyperion that I had a bit of a reputation. Could just be that he was doing the mental math on the cost effectiveness of skipping town for a while versus hiring a hitman.

“And then?”

“I had to tell him about the mess down in Old Town. He wasn’t happy about it, but he’d been wondering why he hadn’t heard from Croesus. I talked you up a bit, about how noble and discreet you are and how you’re just the lady to get his necklace back and so on. He’s interested.”

“What makes you think *I’m* interested?” It’s a bluff. I have to know why Croseus died. I have to know what color Dauphin’s eyes are.

She looks me over. I can’t tell if she likes what she sees. “You are.”

Chapter End Notes

> A lot of Strong's dialog was lifted full stop from Anne's dialog in Farewell, My Lovely. Nothing compares to a random bystander waltzing into Marlowe's office and matter-of-factually telling him she did his job for him. We stan.

Dauphin

Chapter Summary

> Alessandra Strong managed to set up a meeting between Juno and Daupin, the owner of the stolen jade necklace. She claims she tracked down the owner through some solid detective work and out of the goodness of her heart, but Juno has his doubts. He's going anyway, since the picture she showed him of the necklace's owner is a match for Velma, the subject of his original missing person's case.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Zolatovna mansion was one of the floating ones above uptown. It wasn't as flashy as the one the Kanegawas look down on everyone from, at least not from below. Once you're on the surface though, it could go toe-to-toe in a televised competition for the title of "most egregious display of ill-gotten-gains in all of Hyperion." The gates were solid gold. I got a good look at them during the fifteen or so minutes I spent trying to convince the security guard I wasn't trying to rob the place.

"I'm telling you, Dauphin invited me! Call him yourself, if you don't believe me."

"Look buddy-"

"Is there a problem?"

My new pal took a moment to process the interruption: Alessandra Strong, late to the party for once. "No problem. Just taking out the trash."

"Well, one person's trash, another person's recycling."

Neither of them acknowledged my hilarious quip.

"And here I thought your job was to let in people Mr. Zolatovna explicitly asked to be here."

The guy blinked. Looked at her. Looked at me. Looked back at her. "But I thought-"

“That’s a lie.”

He glared. I glared back.

“Whatever.”

The house behind the gates was rather modest. Smaller than the palace of Orbit Shard over Venus, fewer sculptures than the Sol-System Art Gallery. The yard was hardly as big as a Bloodsport arena.

The staff member who opens the door shows us to what I’d describe as a parlor, if only because a living room implies furniture designed to be used, rather than admired as modernist deconstructions of what a chair really means.

Making the most of one such meaning, was a man tall like a lamppost, grey eyes watching me over the rim of a wine glass. The rest of the room only came into focus after he looked away, at his wife who was sprawled on an actual fainting couch by the fireplace. It was better situated than the other two fainting couches, as this one was near both the fireplace and the drinks cart.

“So nice of you to come,” the man-who-might-be-Velma said. “Miss Strong spoke very highly of you over comms.”

“I’m sure she had her reasons.”

He laughed. It was a nice laugh. Bubbly and practiced. I wondered what his real laugh sounded like. “This is my wife, Mrs. Nova Zolatovna.”

Nova went from sprawled to stock-straight in an instant, hand still splayed palm-up on her forehead. “It’s been dreadful!” she exclaimed.

“Every relationship has its ups and downs,” I quipped. Strong glared at me.

“Is nothing safe?” Nova continued. “Is nothing sacred?”

I was beginning to get used to being ignored around here. Ignored by everyone except Velma-Dauphin, whose slate-grey eyes had returned to mine. Maybe not slate. Maybe concrete, to match the stuff weighing down my shoes, rooting me to the spot while he looked me up and down.

“Have a seat, Detective. I’ll strain my neck looking up at you at this

rate."

"Soon as I can find one."

Dauphin grinned, and I found out Ransom left out a detail in his description. Dauphin had sharp teeth. Fox teeth. Suddenly I'd much rather be sitting down. Maybe at a table. Then he uncrossed his legs, set his wineglass delicately on the drinks cart and slid sideways. I didn't move. He patted the spot next to him. I felt Strong's gaze drilling a hole in my head as I moved automatically to take him up on his offer.

"Tell me you can help us!" Nova wailed, now in my ear.

"For peace of mind, if nothing else," Dauphin said, leaning past me to refill his glass. "The jade itself is lovely, but the theft was such a shock. To see things put right would ease the mind."

He glanced past me at his wife, once again draped over the arm of the fainting couch. I wince in sympathy and because her sobs could rival Rita's rants about executive meddling in the writers' room for decibel count.

"What is there to go on?"

He smiled again. "Nova dearest, why don't you show Miss Alessandra where the jade is usually kept? She did such good work tracking down that globe."

Nova didn't take the hint, but she did take her leave, and Strong with her. I had a hard time deciding whether or not I was glad about that, especially when Dauphin reached past me for another glass.

"Would it be a cliche to offer you liquor?"

"Don't let that stop you."

He poured me a drink. I tried not to overthink the way his hand brushed mine when he handed it over. I succeeded, but only because I was overthinking the way his thigh touched mine when he uncrossed his legs.

"Did Croesus tell you how the holdup happened?"

"Not willingly."

He nodded, like that was to be expected. "There was something

strange about the holdup. They gave me back one of my rings; can you believe it?" He dangled his long fingers in front of my face. I wasn't sure which of his rings he meant, probably one with gemstones. Not that it narrowed it down.

"I can't."

"Yet they snapped at the jade. I hardly ever wear it out; it is a museum piece after all. But I'd hardly expect anyone to know the value."

"Who did know?"

He caught his bottom lip between his fox teeth, worrying at it while he thought. I half expected it to come away bloody. "Nova. The maid. But she's had a hundred chances."

"Croesus."

Velma-Dauphin grinned at me, and I realized I was wrong about his eyes. Slate was far too common. His gleamed like silver.

"Croesus," he confirmed. "I'm sure you have your own theories as to why."

"Are they wrong?"

He shrugged, a little carelessly. "Depends on the theory. Oh, don't give me that look, Detective. I never said which theory."

"You didn't have to."

"I'm afraid that says more about you, than it does about me, Detective." His comms chimed. He barely glanced at them, but whatever they said was enough to wipe the smirk off his face. "We'll have to continue this another time. Say, Ten o'clock at the Belvedere Club?"

"But I still have-"

"Excellent." Dauphin stood in a motion so smooth I almost missed it. "I'll await our reunion with bated breath."

"-questions," I finished lamely. But he was already gone.

I drained my glass. After that conversation, I earned it.

Chapter End Notes

My college recently acquired avante-guard modular seating that looks like stacked blocks and isn't comfortable at all. Can you tell I'm bitter?

Shop Talk

Chapter Summary

> Juno just had an eventful meeting with the owner of the jade necklace: a flirty trophy husband named Dauphin Zolotovna. Or Velma Valento, depending on who you asked. Possibly other names too. During the meeting, Juno discovered that Strong was lying about tracing the jade back to the Zolatovna family and had, in fact worked with them in the past. He also confirmed that "Dauphin" was having an affair with the late head of the Kanagawa family.
>
> Now, Juno is meant to be meeting Strong at Florian's to discuss matters.

I didn't hear from Strong for a few hours after that. I didn't mind. It gave me time to collect my thoughts. The first thought was I'd found my client's son. The second was that he was in enough trouble that I couldn't tell my client yet. Another player introduced this late would gum things up enough that I'd never figure out who killed Croesus or why.

Florian was a player; I knew that much. She hadn't wanted me to find the guy, which meant she was invested in keeping his newest identity as Mr. Zolatovna a secret. Or at least his affair with Croesus. Who had she been about to call when she threw me out? And who had called Velma just now?

My own comms went off, reminding me of another player in this mess. Alessandra Strong, the woman working for the Zolatovnas who just so happened to be at the warehouse just in time for Croesus' murder. What did she want out of all of this?

At the moment, she wanted a meeting at Florian's. She was waiting for me in a corner booth, a scotch in her hand that matched the one at the empty seat across from her.

"Took you long enough."

"It's still fashionable for another two minutes."

She rolled her eyes. "So what did Dauphin have to tell you?"

“Let’s trade. You tell me why you were in the warehouse and I tell you what Dauphin told me.”

“I did.”

“Why did you lie about knowing the Zolotovnas?”

“I didn’t have to get you a meeting with them, you know.”

“Then why did you?”

Her knuckles were white on her glass. “I asked you first.”

I stood up. “I’m not saying anything until you give me some answers.”

“Fine. No skin off my nose. I can find another way to get what I need.”

That was less than ideal, but it didn’t mean I could afford to back down. Dauphin hadn’t actually told me anything useful. I didn’t have anything to barter if she knew that. Better to cut my losses and come at it from another angle.

I left the scotch where it was and stormed out of the bar. Strong called out after me. I didn’t pay attention. If I had, I’d have heard her warning about the Kanegawa cousins waiting for me just outside the door.

As it was, I walked out of the bar and into a fist. A pool of darkness opened at my feet and was far, far deeper than the blackest night.

I dived into it. It had no bottom.

Sandstorm

Chapter Summary

> After an unproductive meeting with Strong, Juno was knocked out and kidnapped by a bunch of Kanegawa cousins. Things get worse from there.

Chapter Notes

> I missed yesterday, so this updates a twofer. Go back and read chapter 7 if you haven't already.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The room was full of sand.

Shifting, swirling sand that came up to my knees, then my chest, then filled the whole air. I coughed, but couldn't get it out of my lungs. Or it wasn't in my lungs. Or it was my lungs. The whole world was swirling.

I couldn't tell if I was lying down or standing up. I couldn't tell if those were phrases that meant anything. "Help," I croaked. My throat was as dry as the sand. I tried again: "Help!"

There were footsteps. Loud, thundering footsteps. Boots on synth wood. I frowned. How did I hear synth wood when everything was sand?

The door slid open and a man stepped inside. His hand was at his hip, resting on a blaster. He squinted at me.

"Sandstorm," I explained. "Gotta get inside."

The man sneered at me. "Back to bed, Steel."

Bed? Bed. I was on a bed. Sliding off a bed. My legs were twisted in the red sheets of sand.

When I looked back up, the man was gone and the door was closed. He hadn't taken the sand with him. Maybe he'd gone to grab a broom. Or a vacuum.

My gaze slid from the door without my input. There was another door

in another wall, maybe to a closet or a bathroom. Beside it was a sink. Sink. Water.

I peeled myself off the bed, and then off the ground beside the bed a few seconds later. Dignity was beyond me at this point. I crawled to the sink on hands and knees, scrambling for purchase in the shifting sands.

When I reached the sink I nearly tore it from the wall using it to get back to my feet. I stuck my head under the tap. The water helped, a little. The time I spent standing and breathing feeling the cold porcelain under my hands helped too.

I'd been drugged, I realized, as the sand started to fade from my vision and the world began to feel a little more steady. Drugged to shut me up or make me talk or even just to kill me. I shook my head to clear it and immediately regretted the way it made my stomach churn. Cold, clammy sweat made the undershirt they'd left me with stick to my skin. Not the worst come-down I'd had, all told.

I let go of the sink. My legs were already shaking with the effort of holding me up unaided.

"Okay, Steel," I said to myself. "You're a tough gal. You can take it. You've been knocked down, beaten up, shot full of who-knows-what and kept under for who-knows-how-long. And what does that amount to? Routine. Now let's see you do something really tough, like putting your pants on."

I lay down on the bed again.

Time passed, slow and sluggish. I fell asleep at some point. I dreamt of hourglasses.

When I woke up I felt a little more human. I was able to stumble to the sink this time instead of crawling. I drank more water. Lots of water. The bed seemed to sing a siren song behind me. I shook my head. It didn't make me nauseous that time. I rested my head on the porcelain of the sink and breathed. In. Hold. Out. No sand. This might be as coherent as my captors would let me get. I needed to talk to somebody.

The door next to the sink could have been a closet for all I knew. It was locked. The synth-wood looked flimsy enough to kick in, but that would bring guards. I wasn't ready for that yet.

I went to the bed instead. I stripped the sheets and pulled the mattress off the bed frame. It was supported by a mesh frame held together at the sides by heavy, metal springs. It took ten minutes and several bloody fingers to pry one of the springs out. I swung it a bit to test it. Not the ideal weapon, but I could make it work.

I hid behind the door where it would slide open and pulled as much air into my lungs as I could, now that they were clear of sand. I yelled: “Help! Fire!”

Footsteps again. Loud, thundering footsteps. The door slid open. The man, who I could now tell was a Kanegawa cousin, came into the room. I hit him in the back of the head with the spring. He whirled around, gun halfway out of its holster. I hit him across the face. He went down.

I dragged him into the room; relieved him of his gun, his keycard, comms, and wallet; and tied him to the bedframe with the bedsheets. The keycard let me into the closet where I found my things. Once I was dressed and armed with my own gun I took a quick breather and had another drink of water.

Time to go.

Nobody bothered me as I made my way out of my room, down the hallway, the staircase at the end of it, and all the way to the front door. I stopped with my hand on the handle. I could see a light out of the corner of my eye. It didn’t go away when I blinked. I left the door where it was, and went to investigate.

The light was spilling out from the open door of a cluttered office. The plaque on the wall next to it read “Doctor Lyle Monrovian, NPhD”. The office itself was stuffed to the brim with filing cabinets, taxidermied cats, and overflowing beakers of mysterious origins. One of them might have been used to brew coffee. The whole place smelled like burnt toast and sewer muck.

At the desk, sat an old man, more bones than muscle, with wispy white hair making a break for greener pastures. He stared at me, eyes as wide and round as his glasses. “Oh! Oh dear!”

I stumbled forward, using the doorframe to propel me into the room.

Monrovian jumped about a foot in the air. “Young man, you shouldn’t be up!”

There's a thousand questions I wanted to ask. What comes out is: "What time is it?"

"Saturday afternoon. Or was it Sunday morning? Young man, you shouldn't be up!"

I couldn't see his hands hidden under the desk, but I could track his movement. "Buzzer's busted. Leave it alone."

"I- oh dear. Let me just-" he glanced around his office with an air of desperation before latching onto the beakers. "-make you some tea!" He pushed away from the desk.

I drew my blaster on him. "Sit still. You're working with the Kanegawas."

"Young man, I assure you I'm doing no such thing! Now about that tea-"

"I said sit down!" I had to breathe for a moment after that. The room was swimming. Sand coated the desk. "I have a blaster, damnit! When you've got a blaster in your hand, people are supposed to do what you tell them!"

"Young man, I think you'd better give that to me. You've been very sick."

A took a step backwards. "What did they want you to find out for them?"

"You were suffering from narcotics poisoning. You had to be restrained-"

"Narcotics don't make you fight; you just lay down and die. You aren't a real doctor- what's the N stand for, anyway?"

He hesitated. "Not. Let me just get you some tea."

"Don't bother. I've worked it out anyway. It was Croesus. They wanted to know who killed him. Which would be great if I knew who did."

"You've been very sick!" Monrovian insisted. "If you'd just go back to bed-"

"Save it. I'm leaving."

Monrovian made a move to follow me out. I waved my baster at him.

“If Min calls back, tell her to shove it. I’m not doing her any favors.”

Chapter End Notes

Shoutout to my book of hardboiled pulp quotes that has the whole of the "You're a tough guy" speech under the "Tough Guys with Ugly Mugs" chapter and left out the "putting your pants on" punchline to make it seem cooler. Just admit the template for all hardboiled fiction from 1939 onwards was a kind hearted dumbass with a similar appeal to Tom Hardy in Venom in the lobster tank scene and go.

Home Base

Chapter Summary

> Juno was drugged and held captive by the Kanegawas for days as they tried to figure out who killed Croesus. Now he's out and ready to go home.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The front door was unlocked. The gate beyond that wasn't, but I solved that problem pretty quickly by way of shooting the electronic lock keeping it shut until it was smoking and useless. The gates were heavy and hard to push open, even with the lock broken, but that might have just been the lingering effects of whatever they pumped me full of.

I slumped against the brick wall as soon as I was on the other side. The world was wavering again. My stomach growled. The hair on the back of my neck was standing up.

That last one had less to do with the come-down than it did with the man watching me from across the street.

As I watched, the man peeled himself out of the shadows and crossed the empty street between us. I didn't recognize him at first. Then he passed under the one working streetlight on the whole block.

He was an older man, heavyset and bearded. I racked my brain to come up with his name.

"My word, Steel, is that you?"

"Mag," I said, in a sudden burst of clarity. "Ransom."

"The one and only." He frowned and rested the back of his hand on my forehead like he was taking my temperature. "You aren't looking so good, Steel. You can't very well find my Velma like this."

I batted his arm away. "I'm golden. Never been better."

He chuckled and ducked under my arm so I ended up leaning more on him than the wall. "Let's get you a cab."

We had to go a few streets over to find one. He poured me into the backseat and handed the driver his credchip to scan. He read the driver my address from one of my business cards. I must have been more out of it than I thought if I didn't remember giving him one.

The ride back was a blur. The walk up the stairs to my office was a blur plus another bout of nausea. The light in my office was on and I could hear voices. Rita must be working late.

I fell onto the handle and the voices stopped. Rita was there, like I'd suspected, dual wielding her desktop computer and laptop to do...something. Another woman was standing behind her, staring at me instead of the screens.

"You look like death warmed over," said Alessandra Strong.

"Mistah Steel!" Rita cried. "Are you drunk!?"

"Not yet," I grumbled and stumbled towards my desk and the whiskey in the bottom drawer.

Rita stepped in front of me before I could get more than a few steps in. "I don't think so, Boss. You're gonna sit down on the couch there and tell us what happened."

Arguing with Rita was a lost cause on a good day, so I let her shepherd me onto the couch with minimal complaining. "What time is it?"

"Ten pm," Strong said. "Monday night."

That explained why my stomach hurt so bad. I curled up on the couch and groaned.

"What is it?" Strong asked.

"Funny thing, every third day I get hungry. Rita, could you-"

"I'm already calling the Jovian takeout place, Mistah Steel."

"You should ask HR about a raise."

"I'll be sure to do that, Boss. Now you just lay there and tell Miss Strong what happened."

"Not until she tells me what she's doing here."

“Looking for you, asshole,” Strong snapped. “You’ve been missing since Friday night when I watched you get abducted by Kanegawas.”

“It’s true, Boss,” Rita said, covering the speaker of her comms with one hand. “Miss Strong called me right quick after you got taken. They must have destroyed your comms, because I couldn’t get a good signal. I’ve been going through security camera footage and tracking the movements of every Kanegawa I could think of, and Miss Strong’s been doing all the legwork. It’s been real dramatic, Mistah Steel, like in this one stream *The Eleven and a Half Hour Part Four: The Sidekick’s Story* where it was all about the sidekicks teaming up because the boss was busy because they were filming *Two Ducks at a Horserace* at the same time so the actor for *Big Man Jumbiliah* couldn’t get that much screen time-”

“Rita, you’re off hold.”

“You ready to talk, Steel?”

I told her about the drugs and Monroe, as much as I could remember. I didn’t mention Mag. There wasn’t any point. If Mag knew about Dauphin’s connection to the Kanegawas, he wouldn’t need me to find him.

“Now it’s your turn. Why did you lie about knowing the Zolatovnas? Why were you in the warehouse? What’s your angle in all this?”

Strong deflated. “Fine. It’s not worth all this anyway. I met Nova Zoltovna tracking down a stolen globe. Bought it back from the fence for her. She kept me on payroll after that when more of her things started disappearing. She’s convinced there’s a hole in her security. That somehow someone keeps hiding in camera blindspots and stealing alarm codes.”

“But you don’t.”

She shook her head. “I think it’s the husband. She made him sign a prenup before they got married. I think he’s been scraping together cash from the sales for when he finally leaves her. That’s why I was at the warehouse. I was trying to catch him in the act.”

“But why bring me in? And why lie about it?”

“He was on to me. I thought he might let something slip if he was talking to someone else. But I couldn’t take the chance you were in on it either. Especially since you were ‘making a purchase’.”

“Right!” Rita said, setting the comms down. “That’s enough shop talk for now. Food’s on its way, then I’m driving Mistah Steel home. You can stay if you want to, MIss Strong, but only if you leave the detectiving ‘til tomorrow.”

Strong considered it for a long moment. “I’ll get out of your hair. Take good care of him, Rita.”

“I always do.”

And then she was gone.

Chapter End Notes

> Nuff does not exist in this universe, so Juno cannot steal his cigarettes. Alas.

A Call For Help

Chapter Summary

> Juno made it back to his office in one piece thanks to help from Mag Ransom. Once there, he found Rita and Strong working together to solve his kidnapping. Strong confessed that she'd been working for the Nova all along, tracking down missing items, of which the jade is the latest. Strong suspects Dauphin, and brought Juno in to see if Dauphin would open up more to a stranger than someone working for his wife.
>
> Now it's the night after, and she's calling him in again.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I hadn't gotten nearly enough sleep when my comms woke me up, despite the fact it was nearly sunset. I was tempted to let them ring out, but with the Kanegawas after me and my client wrapped up in it, I knew I couldn't afford to miss the call.

Alessandra Strong was on the other end. "Nova called," she said, without preamble. "Dauphin's missing. She wants to talk to us in person."

"Mmnnghf," I said.

"Be there in half an hour." She hung up.

I was back at the Zolatovna's mansion arguing with the security guard on gate duty 42 minutes later. Strong didn't have to rescue me this time, but it was a near thing.

Making full use of her favorite fainting couch was Nova herself, clutching Strong's coat like a supplicant begging forgiveness from a holy man. I caught Strong's eye across the room. She gave me a pleading look. I strolled into the room and cleared my throat because I'm merciful like that.

"Mrs. Zolatovna. What seems to be the problem?"

"My dearest! My sweetums! My delicate dandelion!"

I waited for her to stop. She didn't. "Dauphin?" I prompted.

"Is missing!" She wailed.

Strong took a swift step backwards to stop Nova from using her coat as a handkerchief. Without Strong to hold her up, Nova fell forwards off the couch, legs still on the cushions, but with her hands and torso on the ground.

"Does he have any known haunts?" Strong asked.

This prompted another round of sobs. "Have you already given him up for dead?!"

"Places he likes to go," I clarified quickly. "Friends, hangouts, that sort of thing."

"The penthouse downtown. Hellas Ave. But that was the first place the HCPD checked, and he wasn't there!"

"It's a start," Strong said.

"Please detectives, you must find him! he'll die if you don't!"

Strong took another step back.

"I'm adrift! Bereft!"

"I'm sure the cops just missed him," I said. "No need to worry, Mrs. Zolatova. Strong and I are on the case."

Chapter End Notes

> According to the prince of mars art, Strong smokes. I choose to believe that before Juno got there, she was the one to strike a match on the butt of a cupid statue, like Marlowe did in my favorite scene of the movie.

Your Slip Shows, Dear

Chapter Summary

> Dauphin is missing and Strong and Juno think they know where he's gone. Nova told them that there's a penthouse downtown he likes to visit. Now they're on their way to check it out.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rita got us the full address, and I caught a ride there with Strong. With livable land at such a premium under the dome, it boggles the mind that there are people who can buy a second apartment just for the hell of it. Assuming that it's just the apartment they own, and not the whole damn building.

It was in a nice part of town, meaning there was something resembling greenery in the planters and all the spray paint murals got painted over into bland uniformity as soon as someone got it in their head to tag a building. It's the sort of place where if you lived there and called the cops, they might even try to help. Of course, Strong and I stuck out like a pair of sore thumbs.

The penthouse itself definitely looked like the HCPD had come and gone, once we turned on the lights. Cushions torn from couches, bare walls with darker patches where a painting used to hang, and a lamp that used to sit beside a window knocked off it's end table and shattered. There was something else, too. A scent I couldn't place.

"Do you smell bergamot?" Strong asked.

"Is that a cologne?"

One door was still closed, at the far end of the living room. Strong hadn't spotted it yet; she was too focused on the desk in the opposite corner. But it was only a matter of time.

"It's in cologne. Tea too. It's a citrus."

Cologne. I could place it now. Velma-Dauphin was wearing it when I'd first met him. He was here.

"What are you going to do once you find Dauphin, anyway?"

Strong shrugged. “Tell him his wife’s looking for him. Search his pockets. Call the cops if I can figure out a way to tie him to Croesus. Come look at this.”

In the top right drawer of the desk was a notepad. The top sheet had been torn off, but Strong found a pencil in the drawer under it and shaded the paper enough that the imprints from the previous page could be made out. They were just four words: Juno Steel, private eye.

I looked up from the paper. Strong was glaring at me. “What is this?”

“It looks like my name.”

“Care to explain what it’s doing in the hideout of the man who, more likely than not, has been stealing from our client and probably killed Croesus?”

“What exactly are you accusing me of?”

“I don’t know. You won’t tell me what you were doing in the warehouse.”

“I did! I told you about the jade thirty seconds after we met!”

“And how did you know about it? I’ve seen your office Steel, you can’t tell me you’re in the market for rare Earth artifacts to liven up the joint.”

“This might surprise you, but sometimes private investigators get paid to buy back other people’s stolen junk. You know, that thing you’ve been doing for Nova for months?”

“Nova hired *me* to get that necklace back. So who were you working for, Steel? Was it Croesus? Dauphin?”

Strong’s eyes went wide before I could reply. I wasn't sure why. Then I heard a voice behind me.

“If only I were so lucky.”

I whirled around. Dauphin was standing in the doorway I’d noticed before, wrapped in a pale, silk robe.

Strong snarled. “You.”

“Me. I’m sorry to disappoint you, Miss Strong, but I’m afraid I haven’t given Juno here a cent. I have a policy of not hiring anyone who

stands me up."

I wasn't sure how to respond to that, so I didn't.

Strong apparently had a similar problem, because she shoved the pad at me and stormed out. She stopped at the door. "I'll tell Nova you're safe." She slammed it shut behind her.

"What the hell?"

"I could hardly have her disparaging your good name, now could I?"

He took a seat on the couch, turning off the lights as he went, leaving me in darkness aside from the desk lamp. The lamp cast long shadows, sharpening his already sculpted cheekbones and glinting off his fox's teeth when he flashed them at me.

"Why did you have my name?"

"If that's what you'd rather talk about."

He inclined his head, inviting me to join him on the couch. I stayed where I was, right until I didn't.

"I know you're looking for me. Or looking for Velma, at least."

"Florian," I realized. "She called you, after she threw me out of her apartment. She warned you about me."

"Just so. She's the only one on Mars who knows about the link between those two aliases, aside from you. Normally I wouldn't let that continue, but it was just so useful to have a warning system."

"Is that why you wanted to get me alone? So you could tie up loose ends? Was that call you got at the mansion the reason I got picked up by the Kanagawas?"

"Oh Juno, no! I had nothing to do with the Kanagawas, aside from the obvious. I'm truly sorry for that, I really am." He took my hand in his and leaned in close, grey eyes wide and vulnerable. "But now that you've seen what I'm up against, you must help me. I'm in terrible danger. *We're* in terrible danger."

"I didn't do anything. You're the one who had an affair with the head of the biggest crime family in Hyperion."

"I've made mistakes, I'll admit. But you're in as much danger as I am

now that they've decided you have something to do with his demise."

"What do you want me to do about it?"

"Run away with me."

He sounded so sincere my heart skipped a beat.

"Hyperion City isn't the safest place for you at the moment, is it? From the sound of things the Kanagawas are very upset with you. It sounds to me like you need to disappear. And I happen to be an expert in disappearances."

He was too close. All of Mars was reduced to silver eyes and the smell of bergamot.

"I need time."

"There isn't much of it."

"I know. I- There's some arrangements I need to make. Things I need to take care of."

"Don't dally, Juno dear. I have two tickets for Duke and Dahlia Rose on a Neptune-bound shuttle that leaves tomorrow morning."

"I'll be back before then." I try to tell myself I'm not running away when I leave him behind.

Chapter End Notes

> Sorry I've missed the past few days; I started an internship and things have been hectic. Now that onboarding's done, it should be smooth sailing. Everything's written, it just needs a little editing.

Out of the Past

Chapter Summary

> Juno and Strong went to the Zolatovna's downtown penthouse in search of the missing Dauphin. While there, Strong found a note that had Juno's name and occupation on it, and accused him of having been working for Dauphin the entire time. Dauphin came out of the bedroom they hadn't checked and told her he wasn't. Strong left to tell Nova where her husband was.
>
> Dauphin told Juno he's been keeping an eye on him ever since Florian told him Juno was looking for "Velma". Then he asked Juno to run away with him. Juno said he had things to take care of first and ran out to buy time. Now he's on his way back to his office to plot his next move. He has till sunrise.

Chapter Notes

> I don't have a good excuse this time. I figured out how to get the sims 2 on my laptop.
>
> Art is by nottodaylogic. Image descriptions at the bottom.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Strong's car was long gone and Rita wasn't answering her comms, so I ended up walking back to my office. I'd like to say that the walk gave me clarity. A shining insight into who Velma was and what he wanted and a neat solution with all the loose ends tied up in a cute little bow. In reality, it just made my feet hurt.

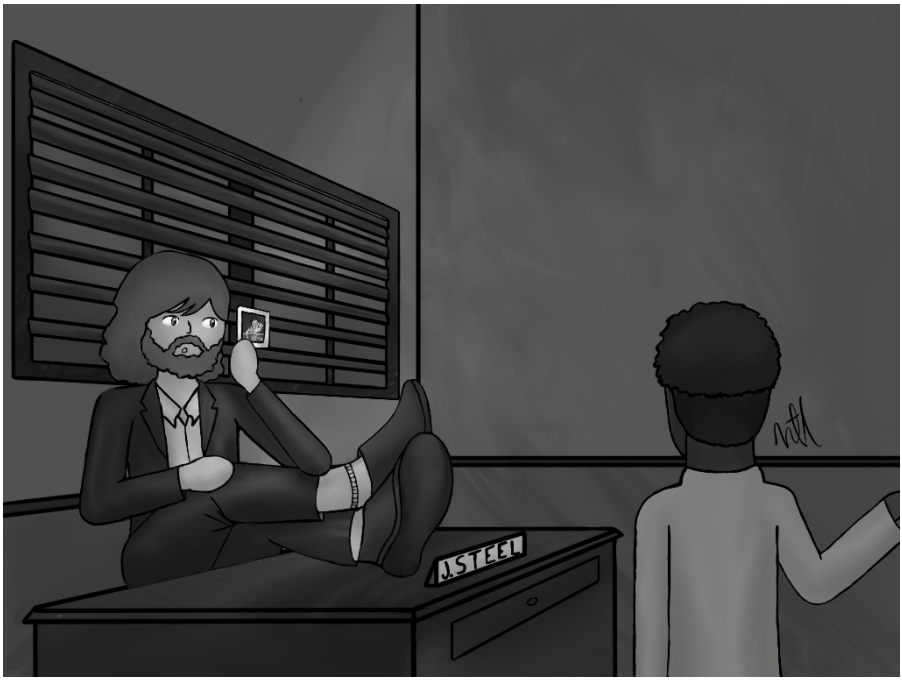
The sun was well past set by the time I made it back to my office. There was a light on still. Rita must have still been working.

She wasn't at her desk in the lobby when I came in, but the shadow in the frosted glass of my office proper gave me an idea of what she was up to.

"Rita, if you let me walk here from Hellas Ave. so you could play detective, I-"

The person sitting at my desk was not Rita. Mag Ransom had his feet on my desk and a photo in his hand. "Detective." The neon lights of the streets filtering through the venitian blinds painted him in purple

and blue stripes. “I think it’s time we talked.”



“Where’s Rita?”

“Home, I expect. It’s for the best, depending on how you answer my

questions."

I put my hand in my pocket. My blaster was a reassuring weight. "What kind of questions."

He turned the picture around. I couldn't make out what it was at this distance, not when the only light came from the streetlights and the open office door. But I didn't need to see it to know what it was: a polaroid of a well-dressed man with grey eyes and a giant fan.

"Why didn't you tell me you found my son?"

"It's...a delicate situation."

"If he's in trouble, I need to know."

Did he? I never got a chance to find out why Velma and Mag fell out. All I knew was he was running. Running from the cops, or the Kanagawas, or Mag, or all three. I needed more information. I didn't like the look in Mag's eye.

"I just need time." I definitely didn't like his hand drifting down to his hip. "Just a few hours. I know where he is; the problem is spooking him." His hand stopped moving, so I pressed on. "You could go to the building and wait downstairs. I'll call you when he's ready to talk."

"Give me the address."

I did, and left my office as quick as I could. Hopefully I'd bought enough time to figure something out with Velma. Or figure something out about Velma.

I pulled out my comms to call a cab. I didn't get the chance to dial before they started ringing. I did a double take at the name on the caller ID.

"Strong?"

"I told Nova where he is, and I told her my suspicions. I thought it was only fair I gave you the heads up, considering… Well, considering. I don't know what your deal is with him, but you'd better figure it out before she gets down there."

I sighed. "Thanks for the heads up."

She hung up on me.

Chapter End Notes

img 1: Mag, a man with long, bushy hair and a beard is sitting on Juno's desk with his feet up. He's holding the polaroid of "Velma" up so Juno can see it. The desk is directly in front of a window covered in venitian blinds, in true noir fashion. Juno is standing in front of the desk with one hand up like it's on the doorframe just out of view. His back is to the viewer.

img 2: The same image but in color. Mag's suit, shoes, and hair are brown brown and his shirt and socks are a bright blue. The blinds are brown but the night outside is a dark blue. The walls are purple and Juno's trench coat is a light tan.

The Long Goodbye

Chapter Summary

> When Juno arrived back at his office, Mag was there with the picture of Velma Juno found. He wanted to know why Juno hadn't told him he'd found "Velma". Juno used the excuse that he was scared of spooking him and told Mag he could wait in the lobby while Juno talked to him. Juno left the office to go back to the penthouse when he got a call from Strong telling him Nova was on her way.
>
> Now it's race against time to see who can get to Velma first.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Giving Mag the address and telling him not to go up was like handing a rabbit carrot cake and expecting him not to eat it, but I didn't have a lot of choices and it was more security than I had for Nova. I got to the apartment first, but not by much. I caught a glimpse of Mag entering the lobby as I got on the elevator.

If Velma was surprised to see me back so soon, he didn't show it. He just looked glad. And good. But that could have been the accessory. A few million creds worth of green rock glittered at his throat.

"Where did you get that?"

"The top left drawer."

"It was never stolen, was it?"

"Not until now." He fiddled with the clasp, and looked at me through dark lashes. "This alone would be more than enough to finance our escape. How would you like to not work for a living?"

I had to turn away. I didn't hear him coming towards me, just felt him hand on my arm. "You lied to Croesus. Lured him to the warehouse, slit his throat, and took the money."

"Yes."

I yanked my arm from his hand.

“He was a bad man, Juno.”

“Why’d you do it? The money? You’re married to Nova Zolatovna. Don’t tell me you’re hurting for cash.”

“It’s more complicated than that.”

“Oh I know.” I took a step backwards and pulled out my comms. He zeroed in on them like they were the most dangerous thing in the room.

“Juno-”

“Who is Mag Ransom?”

Velma went completely still. “How do you know that name?”

“He’s looking for you. Said you were his son. Was that true? Or was Ransom Jr. another convenient lie?”

“I don’t know.”

“How could you not know?!”

Velma’s mask slipped. For a moment, he wasn’t flirty or indulgent, or mysterious. He was just scared. “Juno, please. I know you don’t have any reason to trust me, but however dangerous you think I am, he’s worse. We have to disappear. Now.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you when you haven’t even told me your name.”

“A name?” He ginned, and closed the distance I’d put between us. “Is that what you’re after, Detective? Oh, well, a name would make things simpler, of course. A signifier to your senses, a sound that means a smell, a feeling, a taste…”

“Don’t get cute with me, Velma. Just answer the damn question.”

“But I’m afraid I don’t tell anyone my name. It would take someone very special for me to tell it now.”

He was so. Damn. Close. His eyes were quicksilver. His cologne overwhelmed everything else. He ran a hand down my arm, then moved to my waist. “Look at you. Standing up against the big, mean, world.”

Lips like silk. Strong hands, pulling at my coat. I half expected him to go for my gun, my comms, or my handcuffs. But when he pulled away, my pockets were as heavy as they were before the kiss.

It's the last quiet moment before the door was flung open. Nova burst through in a cloud of glitter and tears. She took one look at the two of us, tangled together and shrieked.

"I never! My sugarplum! My honey biscuit! You-"

I knew the exact moment sheer spotted the necklace because her face actually went red. Bright red, like a tomato.

"You robbed me!"

Velma whispered in my ear: "Time to go, my dear detective."

I jerked away. Nova rushed to him and squished his cheeks between her hands. He looked a bit like a fish. She stared into his eyes, searching for an answer she could stand.

"Is it money you want? Are you in trouble? Why didn't you talk to me?"

I almost missed the door opening. I only noticed because I was watching Velma. His eyes went wide and he pushed Nova aside.

"You were using me all along!"

But no one was paying attention to her anymore. All eyes were on the man in the doorway and the knife in his hand.

"Look at you, all grown up."

Velma took a step back.

Nova looked between her husband and Mag Ransom. I could almost see the gears turning in her head. "Is it him? Were you running from him? Paying him off? Talk to me baby, I can help you!"

Velma ignored her. "You're dead."

"Didn't stick. Looks like my lessons didn't either. I never would have found you if you hadn't spent so long here. First rule of thieving, Pete: Don't get tied down."

Nova took offense at having been left out of the conversation. A gold

slipper bounced off Mag's head. He looked at her finally, huffing and puffing, and hopping on one foot to pull off its twin.

"Are these the only loose ends?" Mag asked. He was ready for the shoe this time. He knocked it out of the air before it hit its target.

"Don't," Velma said.

Mag readied the knife. Then he dropped to the ground. Suddenly, all eyes were on me and my blaster.

"He's just stunned." I didn't know if I was reassuring him or warning him.

Nova let out another sob, muffled this time. Then she gathered up her skirts and ran into the hall. The door slammed shut behind her.

"Who is he?"

Velma picked up Mag's knife. "A piece of my past." He closed his eyes. "It doesn't have to change anything. You can leave Hyperion City behind, I can leave my past behind. We can sell the necklace and live a life of thrills and decadence across the Galaxy, always running, never looking back. We could have quite a time together, Juno."

"You know I can't."

A siren wailed in the distance. A neighbor must have called it. This was the part of town where it's safe to do that. Mostly.

"Then this is where we say goodbye. I hope it's not forever." He flashed me a sad smile and headed to the window.

"There's not a fire escape there."

"I don't need one."

He'd climbed out before my brain caught up with his actions. I raced over to pull him back in, but he was already gone. I leaned out and look up, down, across the street but there's no sign of him.

I needed to be going before the cops got here. There's no story they'll believe that painted me in a good light, assuming they're even willing to listen. I shoved my gun in my pocket. Something crinkled.

That something was a note. A paper note, in beautiful handwriting. He must have slipped it in my pocket when we kissed.

Juno,

Chapter End Notes

We made it! If it makes you feel any better, in my mind Peter's still hanging around Mars and they still get to run off to do space crimes after this mess is cleared up.

Now go watch the movie, I promise the ending's not sad.

End Notes

image id: A mostly black and white movie poster done in the style of old 1940s noir movies. Juno's head and shoulders take up most of the image. He's looking to his left, where a Peter Nureyev floats in a seated position. Nureyev is wearing thigh high heeled boots, and short, high collared dress with shoulder pads and long sleeves underneath. His glasses and a large, triangular jade piece are a bright green and the only color in the image. At the bottom of the image written in all caps and a tall, thin, sans serif are the words "Murder, My Dear Detective". The comma is shaped like a coffin.

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